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Old Muscovy

Around Moscow, the country rolls gently up from the rivers winding in silvery loops across the pleasant landscape. Small lakes and patches of woods are sprinkled among the meadowlands. Here and there, a village appears, topped by the onion dome of its church. People are walking through the fields on dirt paths lined with weeds. Along the riverbanks, they are fishing, swimming and lying in the sun. It is a familiar Russian scene, rooted in centuries.

In the third quarter of the seventeenth century, the traveler coming from Western Europe passed through this countryside to arrive at a vantage point known as the Sparrow Hills. Looking down on Moscow from this high ridge, he saw at his feet "the most rich and beautiful city in the world." Hundreds of golden domes topped by a forest of golden crosses rose above the treetops; if the traveler was present at a moment when the sun touched all this gold, the blaze of light forced his eyes to close. The white-walled churches beneath these domes were scattered through a city as large as London. At the center, on a modest hill, stood the citadel of the Kremlin, the glory of Moscow, with its three magnificent cathedrals, its mighty bell tower, its gorgeous palaces, chapels and hundreds of houses. Enclosed by great white walls, it was a city in itself.

In summer, immersed in greenery, the city seemed like an enormous garden. Many of the larger mansions were surrounded by orchards and

parks, while swaths of open space left as firebreaks burst out with grasses, bushes and trees. Overflowing its own walls, the city expanded into numerous flourishing suburbs, each with its own orchards, gardens and copses of trees. Beyond, in a wide circle around the city, the manors and estates of great nobles and the white walls and gilded cupolas of monasteries were scattered among meadows and tilled fields to stretch the landscape out to the horizon.

Entering Moscow through its walls of earth and brick, the traveler plunged immediately into the bustling life of a busy commercial city. The streets were crowded with jostling humanity. Tradespeople, artisans, idlers and ragged holy men walked beside laborers, peasants, black-robed priests and soldiers in bright-colored caftans and yellow boots. Carts and wagons struggled to make headway through this river of people, but the crowds parted for a fat-bellied, bearded boyar, or nobleman, on horseback, his head covered with a fine fur cap and his girth with a rich fur-lined coat of velvet or stiff brocade. At street corners, musicians, jugglers, acrobats and animal handlers with bears and dogs performed their tricks. Outside every church, beggars clustered and wailed for alms. In front of taverns, travelers were sometimes astonished to see naked men who had sold every stitch of clothing for a drink; on feast days, other men, naked and clothed alike, lay in rows in the mud, drunk.

The densest crowds gathered in the commercial districts centered on Red Square. The Red Square of the seventeenth century was very different from the silent, cobbled desert we know today beneath the fantastic, clustered steeples and cupolas of St. Basil's Cathedral and the high Kremlin walls. Then it was a brawling, open-air marketplace, with logs laid down to cover the mud, with lines of log houses and small chapels built against the Kremlin wall where Lenin's tomb now stands, and with rows and rows of shops and stalls, some wood, some covered by tent-like canvas, crammed into every corner of the vast arena. Three hundred years ago, Red Square teemed, swirled and reverberated with life. Merchants standing in front of stalls shouted to customers to step up and inspect their wares. They offered velvet and brocade, Persian and Armenian silk, bronze, brass and copper goods, iron wares, tooled leather, pottery, innumerable objects made of wood, and rows of melons, apples, pears, cherries, plums, carrots, cucumbers, onions, garlic

and asparagus as thick as a thumb, laid out in trays and baskets. Peddlers and pushcart men forced their way through the crowds with a combination of threats and pleas. Vendors sold pirozhki (small meat pies) from trays suspended by cords from their shoulders. Tailors and street jewelers, oblivious to all around them, worked at their trades. Barbers clipped hair, which fell to the ground unswept, adding a new layer to a matted carpet decades in the forming. Flea markets offered old clothes, rags, used furniture and junk. Down the hill, nearer the Moscow River, animals were sold, and live fish from tanks. On the riverbank itself, near the new stone bridge, rows of women bent over the water washing clothes. One seventeenth-century German traveler noted that some of the women selling goods in the square might also sell "another commodity."

At noon, all activity came to a halt. The markets would close and the streets empty as people ate dinner, the largest meal of the day. Afterward, everyone napped and shopkeepers and vendors stretched out to sleep in front of their stalls.

With the coming of dusk, swallows began to soar over the Kremlin battlements and the city locked itself up for the night. Shops closed behind heavy shutters, watchmen looked down from the rooftops and bad-tempered dogs paced at the end of long chains. Few honest citizens ventured into the dark streets, which became the habitat of thieves and armed beggars bent on extracting by force in the dark what they had failed to get by pleading during the daylight hours. "These villains," wrote an Austrian visitor, "place themselves at the corners of streets and throw swinging cudgels at the heads of those that pass by, in which practice they are so expert that these mortal blows seldom miss." Several murders a night were common in Moscow, and although the motive for these crimes was seldom more than simple theft, so vicious were the thieves that no one dared respond to cries for help. Often, terrorized citizens were afraid even to look out their own doors or windows to see what was happening. In the morning, the police routinely carried the bodies found lying in the streets to a central field where relatives could come to check for missing persons; eventually, all unidentified corpses were tumbled into a common grave.

Moscow in the 1670's was a city of wood. The houses, mansions and hovels alike, were built of logs, but their unique architecture and the

superb carved and painted decoration of their windows, porches and gables gave them a strange beauty unknown to the stolid masonry of European cities. Even the streets were made of wood. Lined with rough timbers and wooden planks, thick with dust in summer or sinking into the mud during spring thaws and September rains, the wood-paved streets of Moscow attempted to provide footing for passage. Often, they failed. "The autumnal rains made the streets impassable for wagons and horses," complained an Orthodox churchman visiting from the Holy Land. "We could not go out of the house to market, the mud and clay being deep enough to sink in overhead. The price of food rose very high, as none could be brought in from the country. All the people, and most of all ourselves, prayed to God that He would cause the earth to freeze."

Not unnaturally in a city built of wood, fire was the scourge of Moscow. In winter when primitive stoves were blazing in every house, and in summer when the heat made wood tinder-dry, a spark could create a holocaust. Caught by the wind, flames leaped from one roof to the next, reducing entire streets to ashes. In 1571, 1611, 1626 and 1671, great fires destroyed whole quarters of Moscow, leaving vast empty spaces in the middle of the city. These disasters were exceptional, but to Muscovites the sight of a burning house with firemen struggling to localize the fire by hastily tearing down other buildings in its path was a part of daily life.

As Moscow was built of logs, Muscovites always kept spares on hand for repairs or new construction. Logs by the thousand were piled up between houses or sometimes hidden behind them or surrounded by fences as protection from thieves. In one section, a large wood market kept thousands of prefabricated log houses of various sizes ready for sale; a buyer had only to specify the size and number of rooms desired. Almost overnight, the timbers, all clearly numbered and marked, would be carried to his site, assembled, the logs chinked with moss, a roof of thin planks laid on top and the new owner could move in. The largest logs, however, were saved and sold for a different purpose. Cut into six-foot sections, hollowed out with an axe and covered with lids, they became the coffins in which Russians were buried.

Rising from a hill 125 feet above the Moscow River, the towers, cupolas and battlements of the Kremlin dominated the city. In Russian, the word "kreml" means "fortress," and the Moscow Kremlin was a mighty citadel. Two rivers and a deep moat rippled beneath its powerful walls. These walls, twelve to sixteen feet thick and rising sixty-five feet above the water, formed a triangle around the crest of the hill, with a perimeter of a mile and a half and a protected enclosure of sixty-nine acres. Twenty massive towers studded the wall at intervals, each a self-contained fortress, each designed to be impregnable. The Kremlin was not impregnable; archers and pikemen and later musketeers and artillerymen could be made to surrender to hunger if not to assault, but the most recent siege, early in the seventeenth century, had lasted two years. Ironically, the besiegers were Russian and the defenders Poles, supporters of a Polish claimant, the False Dmitry, who temporarily occupied the throne. When the Kremlin finally fell, the Russians executed Dmitry, burned his body, primed a cannon on the Kremlin wall and fired his ashes back toward Poland.

In normal times, the Kremlin had two masters, one temporal, the other spiritual: the tsar and the patriarch. Each lived within the fortress and governed his respective realm from there. Crowding around the Kremlin squares were government offices, lawcourts, barracks, bakeries, laundries and stables; nearby stood other palaces and offices and more than forty churches and chapels of the patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church. At the center of the Kremlin, on the crest of the hill around the edges of a wide square, stood four magnificent buildings—three superb cathedrals and a majestic, soaring bell tower—which, then and now, may be considered the physical heart of Russia. Two of these cathedrals, along with the Kremlin wall and many of its towers, had been designed by Italian architects.

The largest and most historic of these cathedrals was the Assumption Cathedral (Uspensky Sobor), in which every Russian tsar or empress from the fifteenth century to the twentieth was crowned. It had been built in 1479 by Ridolfo Fioravanti of Bologna but reflected many essential Russian features of church design. Before beginning its construction, Fioravanti had visited the old Russian cities of Vladimir, Yaroslavl, Rostov and Novgorod to study their beautiful cathedrals, and then produced a Russian church with far more space inside than any

Russian had ever seen. Four huge circular columns supported the onion-shaped central dome and its four smaller satellite domes without the complicated webbing of walls and buttressing previously thought necessary. This gave an airiness to the ceiling and a spaciousness to the nave entirely unique in Russia, where the power as well as the beauty of the Gothic arch were unknown.

Across the square from the Assumption Cathedral stood the Cathedral of the Archangel Michael, where the tsars were entombed. Built by Alvesio Novy of Milan, it was considerably more Italianate than either of its two sisters. Inside, amidst its several chapels, the deceased rulers were clustered in groups. In the middle of one small room, three carved stone coffins held Ivan the Terrible and his two sons. Other tsars lay in rows along the walls, their coffins of brass and stone covered with embroidered velvet cloths with inscriptions sewn in pearls around the hems. Tsar Alexis, father of Peter the Great, and two of his sons, Fedor and Ivan VI, also both tsars, would lie in this small room, but they would be the last. Alexis' third son, Peter, would build a new cathedral in a new city on the Baltic where he and all the Romanovs who followed would be entombed.*

The smallest of the three cathedrals, the Cathedral of the Annunciation, had nine towers and three porches, and was the only one designed by Russian architects. Its builders came from Pskov, which was famous for its carved stone churches. Used extensively as a private chapel by the tsars and their families, its iconostasis was set with icons by the two most famous painters of this form of religious art in Russia, Theophanes the Greek, who came from Byzantium, and his Russian pupil Andrei Rublev.

On the eastern side of the square, towering above the three cathedrals, stood the whitewashed brick bell towers of Ivan the Great, the Bono Tower and the Tower of the Patriarch Philaret, now joined into a single structure. Beneath its highest cupola, 270 feet in the air, rows of

* Except Peter II, whose body is in the Kremlin. The bones of Nicholas II, the last tsar, were discovered in a forest grave outside Ekaterinburg in the Urals, brought to St. Petersburg, and interred in the cathedral in 1998. This discovery, and the bitter but ultimately successful struggle to scientifically verify these bones, are the subject of the author's book *The Romanovs: The Final Chapter.*

bells hung in laddered niches. Cast in silver, copper, bronze and iron, in many sizes and timbres (the largest weighed thirty-one tons), they rang with a hundred messages: summoning Muscovites to early mass or vespers, reminding them of fasts and festivals, tolling the sadness of death, chiming the happiness of marriage, jangling warnings of fire or booming the celebration of victory. At times, they rang all night, driving foreigners to consternation. But Russians loved their bells. On holidays, the common people crowded to the belfries to take turns pulling the ropes. The first bells usually sounded from the Kremlin, then the sound was taken up by all the bells of Moscow's "forty times forty" churches. Before long, waves of sound passed over the city and "the earth shook with their vibrations like thunder" according to one awed visitor.

From building cathedrals, the Italian architects turned to building palaces. In 1487, Ivan the Great commissioned the first stone palace of the Kremlin, the Palace of Facets (Granovitaya Palata), so named because its gray stone exterior walls were cut prismatically to resemble the surface of facet-cut jewels. Its most notable architectural feature was a throne room seventy-seven feet on each side, whose roof was supported by a single, massively arched column in the middle. When foreign ambassadors were being received, and on other state occasions, a small curtained window near the ceiling permitted the cloistered women of the tsar's family to peek down and watch.

The Palace of Facets was primarily an official state building, and thus, in 1499, Ivan the Great ordered another palace of brick and stone in which to live. This five-story building, called the Terem Palace, contained a honeycomb of low-ceilinged, vaulted apartments for himself and the many women—wives, widows, sisters, daughters—of the royal family. The building was badly damaged by fire several times during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, but both of the first Romanov tsars, Michael and his son Alexis, lavished great efforts to restore the building. In Alexis' time, the doors, windows, parapets and cornices were made of white stone carved into foliage and figures of birds and animals, then painted bright colors. Alexis devoted special effort to refurbishing the fourth floor as a dwelling for himself. The five principal rooms—anteroom, throne room (known as the Golden Hall), study, bedroom and private chapel—were fitted with wooden walls and

floors to prevent the dampness caused by moisture condensing on brick and stone, and the walls were covered with hangings of embroidered silk, woolen tapestries or tooled leather, depicting scenes from the Old and New Testaments. The arches and ceilings were intersected by curving arabesques and Eastern versions of plants and fairy-tale birds, all done in brilliant colors with lavish inlays of silver and gold. The furnishing of the tsar's apartment was partly traditional and partly modern. The old, carved oaken benches and chests and polished wooden tables were there, but so also were upholstered armchairs, elaborate gilded and ebony tables, clocks, mirrors, portraits and bookcases filled with books of theology and history. One window of the tsar's study was known as the Petitioner's Window. Outside was a small box which could be lowered to the ground, stuffed with petitions and complaints, then raised to be read by the sovereign. The tsar's bedroom was upholstered with Venetian velvet and contained an intricately carved four-poster oak bed, curtained and canopied with brocade and silk and heaped with furs, eiderdown and cushions to ward off the icy currents of winter air that blasted against the windows and eddied under the doors. All these rooms were simultaneously heated and decorated by huge stoves of glazed, colored tiles whose radiant warmth also kept Russia's rulers warm.

The major drawback to these splendid chambers was their lack of light. Little sunlight could filter through the narrow windows with their double sheets of mica separated by strips of lead. Not only at night and on the short, gray days of winter, but even in summertime, most of the illumination in the Terem Palace came from the light of flickering candles in the alcoves and along the walls.

In the third quarter of the seventeenth century, the royal chambers were occupied by the second tsar of the Romanov dynasty, "the Great Lord, Tsar and Grand Duke, Alexis Mikhailovich, of all Great and Little and White Russia, Autocrat." Remote and inaccessible to his subjects, this august figure was enclosed in an aura of semi-divinity. An embassy of Englishmen, come in 1664 to thank the Tsar for his constant support of their once-exiled monarch, Charles II, was deeply impressed by the sight of Tsar Alexis seated on his throne:

> The Tsar like a sparkling sun darted forth most sumptuous rays, being most magnificently placed upon his throne, with his scepter in his hand and having his crown on his head. His throne was of massy silver gilt, wrought curiously on top with several works and pyramids; and being seven or eight steps higher than the floor, it rendered the person of the Prince transcendently majestic. His crown (which he wore upon a cap lined with black sables) was covered quite over with precious stones, terminating toward the top in the form of a pyramid with a golden cross at the spire. The scepter glittered also all over with jewels, his vest was set with the like from the top to the bottom and his collar was answerable to the same.

From infancy, Russians had been taught to regard their ruler as an almost god-like creature. Their proverbs embodied this view: "Only God and the tsar know," "One sun shines in heaven and the Russian tsar on earth," "Through God and the tsar, Russia is strong," "It is very high up to God; it is a very long way to the tsar."

Another proverb, "The sovereign is the father, the earth the mother," related the Russian's feeling for the tsar to his feeling for the land. The land, the earth, the motherland, "rodina," was feminine. Not the pure maiden, the virgin girl, but the eternal, mature woman, the fertile mother. All Russians were her children. In a sense, long before communism, the Russian land was communal. It belonged to the tsar as father, but also to the people, his family. Its disposal belonged to the tsar—he could give away vast tracts to favored noblemen—yet it still remained the joint property of the national family. When it was threatened, all were willing to die for it.

The tsar, in this familial scheme, was the father, "Batushka," of the people. His autocratic rule was patriarchal. He addressed his subjects as his children and had the same unlimited power over them that a father has over his children. The Russian people could not imagine any limitation of the power of the tsar, "for how can a father's authority be limited except by God?" When he commanded, they obeyed for the same reason that when a father commands, the child must obey, without question. At times, obeisance before the tsar took on a slavish,

Byzantine quality. Russian noblemen, when greeting or receiving favors from the tsar, prostrated themselves in front of him, touching the ground with their foreheads. When addressing his royal master, Artemon Matveev, who was Tsar Alexis' leading minister and close friend, declared, "We humbly beseech you, we your slave Artemushka Matveev, with the lowly worm, my son Adrushka, before the high throne of Your Royal Majesty, bowing our faces to the earth. . . ." In addressing the tsar, his whole lengthy official title had to be used. In so doing, the accidental omission of a single word could be considered an act of personal disrespect almost equivalent to treason. The tsar's own conversation was sacrosanct: "'Tis death for anyone to reveal what is spoken in the tsar's palace," declared an English resident.

In fact, the demi-god who bore these titles, who wore a crown braided with "tufts of diamonds as big as peas, resembling bunches of glittering grapes" and the imperial mantle embroidered with emeralds, pearls and gold, was a relatively unassuming mortal. Tsar Alexis was recognized in his own time as "tishaishy tsar," the quietest, gentlest and most pious of all the tsars, and when he succeeded his father on the throne in 1645 at the age of sixteen, he was already known as "the Young Monk." In manhood, he grew taller than most Russians, about six feet, well built, inclined to fat. His roundish face was framed by light-brown hair, a mustache and a flowing brown beard. His eyes also were brown, their tone ranging from hardness in anger to warmth in affection and religious humility. "His Imperial Majesty is a goodly person, about two months older than King Charles II," reported his English physician, Dr. Samuel Collins, adding that his patron was "severe in his chastisements but very careful of his subjects' love. Being urged by a stranger to make it [punishable by] death for any man to desert his colors, he answered, 'It was a hard case to do that, for God has not given courage to all men alike.'"

Although he was tsar, Alexis' life inside the Kremlin was more like that of a monk. At four A.M., the Tsar threw aside his sable coverlet and stepped from his bed clad in shirt and drawers. He dressed and went immediately to the chapel next to his bedroom for twenty minutes of prayers and readings from devotional books. When he had kissed the icons and been sprinkled with holy water, he emerged and sent a chamberlain to bid the Tsaritsa good morning and ask after her health. A few minutes later, he went to her chamber to escort her to another chapel, where together they heard morning prayers and early mass.

Meanwhile, boyars, government officials and secretaries had gathered in a public anteroom awaiting the arrival of the Tsar from his private chambers. As soon as they saw "the bright eyes of the Tsar," they began to bow to the ground, some as many as thirty times, in gratitude for favors granted. For a while, Alexis listened to reports and petitions; then, at about nine A.M., the entire group went to hear a two-hour mass. During the service, however, the Tsar continued to converse quietly with his boyars, conducting public business and issuing instructions. Alexis never missed any divine service. "If he be well, he goes to it," said Dr. Collins. "If sick, it comes to him in his chamber. On fast days he frequents midnight prayers, standing four, five, or six hours together, prostrating himself on the ground, sometimes a thousand times, and on great festivals, fifteen hundred."

Following morning mass, the Tsar returned to administrative work with his boyars and secretaries until time for dinner at noon. He ate alone at a high table surrounded by boyars who dined at lower tables along the walls of the room. He was served only by special boyars, who tasted his food and sipped his wine before offering the cup. Meals were gargantuan; on festival days, as many as seventy dishes might be served at the Tsar's table. Zakuski, or hors d'oeuvres, included raw vegetables, especially cucumbers, salted fish, bacon and innumerable pirozhki, sometimes stuffed with egg, fish, rice or cabbage and herbs instead of meat. Then came soups and roasts of beef, mutton and pork, seasoned with onion, garlic, saffron and pepper. There were dishes of game and fish such as salmon, sturgeon and sterlet. Dessert was cakes, cheeses, preserves, fruits. Russians drank mostly vodka, beer or a milder drink called kvas, made of fermented black bread, variously flavored with raspberry, cherry or other fruits.

But Alexis rarely touched any of the succulent dishes that were presented to him. Instead, he sent them as presents to various boyars to show special favor. His own palate was monastically simple. He ate only plain rye bread and drank light wine or beer, perhaps with a few drops of cinnamon added; cinnamon, Dr. Collins reported, was the

"aroma imperiale." During periods of religious fasting, said Dr. Collins, the Tsar "eats but three meals a week; for the rest, he takes a piece of brown bread and salt, a pickled mushroom or cucumber and drinks a cup of small beer. He eats fish but twice in Lent and observes it seven weeks altogether. . . . In fine, no monk is more observant of canonical hours than he is of fasts. We may reckon he fasts almost eight months in twelve."

Following dinner, the Tsar slept for three hours until time to return to church for vespers, again with his boyars, again to consult on affairs of state during the religious service. Supper and the end of the day were spent either with his family or with intimate friends playing backgammon or chess. Alexis' special pleasure during these hours was to listen to people read or tell stories. He liked hearing passages from books of church history, or the lives of saints, or the presentation of religious dogma, but he also liked to hear the reports of Russian ambassadors traveling abroad, extracts from foreign newspapers or simple tales told by pilgrims and wanderers who had been brought to the palace to entertain the monarch. In warmer weather, Alexis left the Kremlin to visit his country mansions outside Moscow. One of these at Preobrazhenskoe on the Yauza River was the center of Alexis' favorite sport, falconry. Over the years, the enthusiastic huntsman built up an immense establishment of 200 falconers, 3,000 falcons and 100,000 pigeons.

Most of the time, however, Alexis prayed and worked. He never questioned his own divinely granted right to rule; in his mind, he and all monarchs were chosen by God and responsible only to God.* Beneath the tsar stood the nobility, divided into almost a dozen ranks. The greatest noblemen held the highest rank, that of boyar, and were members of the old princely families who held hereditary landed estates. Below were the lesser aristocracy and gentry who had been given estates in return for service. There was a small middle class of merchants, artisans and other townspeople and then—the huge base of the

* When the English Parliamentarians cut off the head of King Charles I, in 1649, Tsar Alexis was so shocked and personally outraged that he expelled all English merchants from the interior of Russia, a move which gave great advantage to Dutch and German merchants. While King Charles II remained in exile, Alexis sent him money and his tenderest wishes for "the disconsolate widow of that glorious martyr, King Charles I."

pyramid—the peasants and serfs who made up the overwhelming mass of Russian society; their conditions of life and methods of farming were roughly similar to those of the serfs of medieval Europe. Most Muscovites used the title "boyar" to include all noblemen and high officials. Meanwhile, the actual daily work of administering the tsar's government was in the hands of between thirty and forty departments known as Prikazy. Generally speaking, they were inefficient, wasteful, overlapping, difficult to control and corrupt—in brief, a bureaucracy which nobody had designed and over which no one had any real control.

From his dimly lit, incense-scented Kremlin rooms and chapels, Tsar Alexis ruled the largest nation on earth. Vast plains, endless tracts of dark forest and boundless expanses of desert and tundra stretched from Poland to the Pacific. Nowhere in this immensity of space was the wide horizon broken by more than shallow mountains and rolling hills. The only natural barriers to movement on the broad plain were the rivers, and from the earliest times these had been converted into a network of watery highways. In the region around Moscow, four great rivers had their tributary headwaters: the Dnieper, the Don and the mighty Volga flowed south to the Black and the Caspian seas; the Dvina flowed north to the Baltic and the frozen Arctic.

Scattered over this immense landscape was a thin sprinkling of human beings. At the time of Peter's birth—near the end of Tsar Alexis' reign—the population of Russia was roughly eight million people. This was about the same as that of Russia's western neighbor, Poland, although the Russians were dispersed over a far greater area. It was much larger than the population of Sweden (less than two million) or England (slightly more than five million), but less than half that of the most populous and powerful state in Europe, the France of Louis XIV (nineteen million). A fraction of the Russian population lived in the old Russian towns—Nizhni-Novgorod, Moscow, Novgorod, Pskov, Vologda, Archangel, Yaroslavl, Rostov, Vladimir, Suzdal, Tver, Tula—and in the more recently acquired Kiev, Smolensk, Kazan and Astrachan. Most of the people lived on the land, where they wrenched a living from the earth, the forest and the waters.

Enormous though Alexis' tsardom was, Russia's boundaries were

fragile and under pressure. In the east, under Ivan the Terrible and his successors, Muscovy had conquered the middle Volga and the khanate of Kazan, extending the Russian empire to Astrachan and the Caspian Sea. The Urals had been crossed and the immense, largely empty spaces of Siberia added to the tsar's domain. Russian pioneers had penetrated to the northern Pacific and established a few bleak settlements there, although a clash with the aggressive Manchu Dynasty of China had forced a withdrawal of Russian outposts along the Amur River.

To the west and the south, Russia was ringed by enemies who struggled to keep the giant landlocked and isolated. Sweden, then reigning as Mistress of the Baltic, stood guard across this seaborne road to the West. Westward lay Catholic Poland, the ancient enemy of Orthodox Russia. Only recently, Tsar Alexis had reconquered Smolensk from Poland, although that Russian fortress town lay a mere 150 miles from Moscow. Late in his reign, Alexis had won back from Poland the shining prize of Kiev, mother of all Russian cities and the birthplace of Russian Christianity. Kiev and the fertile regions both east and west of the Dnieper were the lands of the Cossacks. These were Orthodox people, originally vagabonds, freebooters and runaways who had fled the onerous conditions of life in old Muscovy to form bands of irregular cavalry and then to become pioneers, colonizing farms, villages and towns throughout the upper Ukraine. Gradually, this line of Cossack settlements was spreading southward, but the limits still were 300 or 400 miles above the shores of the Black Sea.

The ground in between, the famous black-earth steppe of the lower Ukraine, was empty. Here, tall grasses grew so high that sometimes only the head and shoulders of a man on horseback could be seen moving along above the grass. In Alexis' day, this steppe was the hunting and grazing ground of the Crimean Tatars, Islamic descendants of the old Mongol conquerors and vassals of the Ottoman sultan, who lived in villages along the slopes and among the crags of the mountainous Crimean peninsula. Every spring and summer, they brought their cattle and horses down to feed on the steppe grasslands. Often enough, they strapped on their bows, arrows and scimitars and rode north to raid and plunder among the Russian and Ukrainian villages, sometimes storming the wooden stockade of a town and leading the entire popula-

tion off into slavery. These massive raids, bringing thousands of Russian slaves annually into the Ottoman slave markets, were a source of embarrassment and anguish to the tsars in the Kremlin. But there was nothing so far that anyone could do. Indeed, twice, in 1382 and 1571, the Tatars had sacked and burned Moscow itself.

Beyond the massive white Kremlin battlements, beyond the gilt and blue onion domes and the wooden buildings of Moscow lay the fields and the forest, the true and eternal Russia. For centuries, everything had come from the forest, the deep, rich, virgin forest which stretched as far as an ocean. Amidst its birches and firs, its bushes with berries, its mosses and soft ferns, the Russian found most of what he needed for life. From the forest came logs for his house and firewood for warmth, moss to chink his walls, bark for his shoes, fur for his clothing, wax for his candles, and meat, sweet honey, wild berries and mushrooms for his dinner. Through most of the year, the forest groves rang with the sound of axes. On lazy summer days, men, women and children searched beneath the dark trunks for mushrooms, or brushed through the high grasses and flowers to pick wild raspberries and red and black currants.

Russians are a communal people. They did not live alone deep in the forest, contesting the primeval weald with wolf and bear. Rather they chose to cluster in tiny villages built in forest clearings, or on the edges of lakes or the banks of slow-moving rivers. Russia was an empire of such villages: lost at the end of a dusty road, surrounded by pasture and meadowland, a collection of simple log houses centered on a church whose onion dome gathered up the prayers of the villagers and passed them along to heaven. Most of the houses had only a single room without a chimney; smoke from the fire burning inside the stove found its way outdoors as best it could, through cracks in the logs. Usually, as a result, everything and everyone inside was black with soot. For this reason, too, public baths were a common institution in Russia. Even the smallest village had its steaming bathhouse where men and women together could scrub themselves clean and then go outside, even in winter, to permit the wind to cool and dry their heated, naked bodies.

When the Russian peasant dressed, first combing his beard and hair, he put on a shirt of rough cloth which hung over his waist and was tied with a string. His trousers were loose and were stuffed into boots if he owned them, or, more often, into cloth leggings tied with heavy threads. "Their hair is cropt to their ears and their heads covered winter and summer with a fur cap," wrote a Western visitor. "Their beards remain yet untouched. . . . Their shoes are tied together with bast. About their neck they wear from the time of their baptism a cross, and next to it their purse, though they commonly keep the small money, if it be not much, a good while in their mouth, for as soon as they receive any, either as a present, or as their due, they put it into their mouths and keep it under their tongue."

Few people in the world live in such harmony with nature as the Russians. They live in the North, where winter comes early. In September, the light is fading by four in the afternoon and an icy rain begins. Frost comes quickly, and the first snow falls in October. Before long, everything vanishes beneath a blanket of whiteness: earth, rivers, roads, fields, trees and houses. Nature takes on not only a majesty but a frightening omnipotence. The landscape becomes a broad white sea with mounds and hollows rising and falling. On days when the sky is gray, it is hard, even straining the eye, to see where earth merges with air. On brilliant days, when the sky is a gorgeous azure, the sunlight is blinding, as if millions of diamonds were scattered on the snow, refracting light.

After 160 days of winter, spring lasts only for several weeks. First the ice cracks and breaks on rivers and lakes, and the murmuring waters, the dancing waves return. On land, the thaw brings mud, an endless, vast sea of mud through which man and beast must struggle. But every day the dirty snow recedes, and soon the first sprouts of green grass appear. Forest and meadows turn green and come to life. Animals, larks and swallows reappear. In Russia, the return of spring is greeted with a joy inconceivable in more temperate lands. As the warming rays of the sun touch meadow grass and the backs and faces of peasants, as the days rapidly grow longer and the earth everywhere is coming to life, the glad feeling of revival, of deliverance, urges people to sing and celebrate. The 1st of May is an ancient holiday of rebirth and fertility when people dance and wander in the woods. And while youth revels, the older people thank God that they have lived to see this glory again.

Spring races quickly into summer. There is great heat and choking dust, but there is also the loveliness of an immense sky, the calm of the great land rolling gently to the horizon. There is the freshness of early morning, the coolness of shade in groves of birches or along the rivers, the mild air and warm wind of night. In June, the sun dips beneath the horizon for only a few hours and the red of sunset is followed quickly by the delicate rose-and-blue blush of dawn.

Russia is a stern land with a harsh climate, but few travelers can forget its deep appeal, and no Russian ever finds peace in his soul anywhere else on earth.

2

PETER'S CHILDHOOD

In March 1669, when Tsar Alexis was forty, his first wife, the Tsaritsa Maria Miloslavskaya, died in the attempted performance of her essential dynastic function: that is, in giving birth to a child. She was greatly mourned, not only by her husband, but also by her numerous Miloslavsky relatives whose power at court had rested on her marriage to the Tsar. Now, all this was over, and through their tears for their departed sister and niece they watched and worried.

Their uneasy situation was worsened by the fact that, despite all her efforts, Maria had not left behind her the certainty of a Miloslavsky heir. During her twenty-one years of marriage to Alexis, Maria, four years older than her husband, had done her best: thirteen children—five sons and eight daughters—were born before the attempt to produce a fourteenth killed her. None of Maria's sons was strong; four survived her, but within six months two of these were gone, including the sixteen-year-old heir to the throne, named Alexis after his father. Thus, on the death of his wife, the Tsar was left with only two sons of the Miloslavsky marriage—two sons, unfortunately, whose prospects were poor. Fedor, then ten, was frail, and Ivan, aged three, was half blind and had a speech impediment. If both died before their father, or soon after him, the succession would be open, and no one knew who might lunge for the throne. In short, all Russia except the Miloslavskys hoped that Alexis would find a new wife and do so quickly.

If the Tsar did select a new tsaritsa, it was understood that his choice would be a daughter of the Russian nobility and not one of the available foreign princesses. The intermarriage of dynasties for the advancement or protection of state interests was common in most parts of seventeenth-century Europe, but in Russia the practice was abhorred and avoided. Russian tsars chose Russian consorts, or, more specifically, an Orthodox tsar could choose only an Orthodox tsaritsa. The Russian church, the nobility, the merchants and the mass of simple Russian people would look with horror at a foreign princess bringing in her train Catholic priests or Protestant pastors to corrupt the pure Orthodox faith. This ban helped to isolate Russia from most of the effects of intercourse with foreign nations and ensured the keenest jealousy and competition among those noble Russian families who had among their daughters a potential tsaritsa.

Within a year of Maria Miloslavskaya's death, Alexis had found her successor. Depressed and lonely, he spent frequent evenings at the home of his intimate friend and chief minister, Artemon Matveev, an unusual man for seventeenth-century Muscovy. He was not from the highest boyar class, but had risen to power on merit. He was interested in scholarly subjects and was fascinated by Western culture. At the regular receptions which he held in his house for foreigners living in or visiting Moscow, he questioned them intelligently on the state of politics, art and technology in their homelands. Indeed, it was in the German Suburb, the settlement just outside the city where all foreigners were required to live, that he found his own wife, Mary Hamilton, the daughter of a Scots royalist who had left Britain after the beheading of Charles I and the triumph of Cromwell.

In Moscow, Matveev and his wife lived as much as possible like modern seventeenth-century Europeans. They hung their walls with paintings and mirrors in addition to icons; inlaid cabinets displayed Oriental porcelains and chiming clocks. Matveev studied algebra and dabbled in chemistry experiments in his home laboratory, and concerts, comedies and tragedies were performed in his small private theater. To traditional Muscovites, the behavior of Matveev's wife was shocking. She wore Western dresses and bonnets; she refused to seclude herself on an upper floor of her husband's house like most Moscow wives, but appeared freely among his guests, sitting down with them at dinner and sometimes even joining in the conversation.

It was during one of these unconventional evenings in the presence of the unusual Mary Hamilton that the eye of the widower Tsar Alexis fell on a second remarkable woman in Matveev's household. Natalya Naryshkina was then nineteen years old, a tall, shapely young woman with black eyes and long eyelashes. Her father, Kyril Naryshkin, a relatively obscure landowner of Tatar origins, lived in Tarus province, far from Moscow. In order to lift his daughter above the life of the rural gentry, Naryshkin had persuaded his friend Matveev to accept Natalya as his ward and raise her in the atmosphere of culture and freedom that characterized the minister's house in Moscow. Natalya had profited from her opportunity. For a Russian girl, she was well educated, and by watching and assisting her foster mother she had learned to receive and entertain male guests.

One evening when the Tsar was present, Natalya came into the room with Mary Hamilton to serve cups of vodka and plates of caviar and smoked fish. Alexis stared at her, noticing her healthy, glowing good looks, her black, almond-shaped eyes and her serene but modest behavior. When she stood before him, he was impressed by the blend of respect and good sense in her brief replies to his questions. Leaving Matveev's house that night, the Tsar was much cheered up, and in saying good night he asked Matveev whether he was looking for a husband for this appealing young woman. Matveev replied that he was, but that, as neither Natalya's father nor he himself was rich, the dowry would be small and suitors doubtless few. Alexis declared that there were still a few men who valued a woman's qualities higher than her fortune, and he promised to help his minister find one.

Not long after, the Tsar asked Matveev whether he had had any success. "Sire," replied Matveev, "young men come every day to see my charming ward, but none seem to think of matrimony."

"Well, well, so much the better," said the Tsar. "Perhaps we shall be able to do without them. I have been more fortunate than you. I have found a gentleman who will probably be agreeable to her. He is a very honorable man with whom I am acquainted, is not destitute of merit

and has no need of a dowry. He loves your ward and is inclined to marry her and make her happy. Though he has not yet disclosed his sentiments, she knows him, and if she is consulted, I think she will accept him."

Matveev declared that of course Natalya would accept anyone "proposed by Your Majesty. However, before she gives her consent, she may probably desire to know who he is. And this appears to me no more than what is reasonable."

"Well, then," announced Alexis, "tell her it is me, and that I am determined to marry her."

Matveev, overwhelmed by the implications of this declaration, threw himself at his sovereign's feet. He recognized instantly both the glittering prospects and the unfathomable dangers of Alexis' decision. To have his ward elevated to tsaritsa would seal his own success: her relatives and friends would rise along with her; they and he would replace the Miloslavskys as the ruling power at court. But it also meant dangerously stimulating the antagonism of the Miloslavskys, as well as the jealousy of many of the powerful boyar families who already were suspicious of his role as favorite. If, somehow, the choice was announced and then the match misfired, Matveev would be ruined.

With this in mind, Matveev begged that even if determined on his choice, the Tsar would nevertheless submit to the traditional process of publicly picking his bride from a flock of assembled candidates. The ceremony, which had its antecedents in Byzantium, decreed that women of marriageable age from all parts of Russia should assemble at the Kremlin for the tsar's inspection. In theory, the women were to come from every class of Russian society, including serfs, but in practice this fairy tale never came true. No tsar ever gazed on a beautiful serf maiden and, smitten, led the blushing creature off to become his tsaritsa. However, the assembly did include daughters of the lesser nobility, and Natalya Naryshkina's rank made her perfectly eligible. At court, the frightened young women, pawns in the ambitions of their families, were examined by court officials to certify virginity. Those who survived this scrutiny were summoned to the Kremlin palace to await the smile or nod of the boy or man who could place one of them on the throne.

A game played for the highest stakes also entails high risks. Within that same century, there had been grim examples of the lengths to

which ambitious families would go to prevent a girl from another family becoming the new tsaritsa. In 1616, Maria Khlopfa, the known choice of nineteen-year-old Michael Romanov, had so displeased the Saltykov family, then predominant at court, that they drugged the girl, presented her to Michael in this state, told the Tsar that she was incurably ill and then, as punishment for daring to present herself as a potential bride, dispatched Maria and all her family to exile in Siberia. In 1647, Alexis himself, at the age of eighteen, had chosen Euphemia Vsevolozhska to be his first wife. But when she was being dressed, a group of court ladies twisted her hair so tightly that in Alexis' presence she fainted. The court physicians were persuaded to declare that she had epilepsy, and she and her relatives were also dispatched to Siberia. Maria Miloslavskaya had been Alexis' second choice.

Now, for Natalya Naryshkina and for Matveev, who stood behind her, similar dangers loomed. The Miloslavskys knew that if Natalya was chosen, their influence would be undermined. This reversal would affect not only the male Miloslavskys who held high office and wielded power, but the females as well. All of the royal princesses, Tsar Alexis' daughters, were Miloslavskys, and they did not at all like the prospect of a new tsaritsa actually younger than some of them.

Nevertheless, Natalya and Matveev really had no choice: Alexis was determined. Notice had been given that on February 11, 1670, the preliminary inspection of all eligible young women would take place, and Natalya Naryshkina was commanded to be present. A second inspection, by the Tsar himself, was scheduled for April 28. But, soon after the first assembly, rumors spread that Natalya Naryshkina had been chosen. The inevitable counterattack was prepared, and, four days before the second inspection, anonymous letters were found in the Kremlin accusing Matveev of using magic herbs to make the Tsar desire his ward. An investigation was necessary, and the marriage was postponed for nine months. But nothing was proved, and finally, on February 1, 1671, to the joy of most Russians and the chagrin of the Miloslavskys, Tsar Alexis and Natalya Naryshkina were married.

From the day of their marriage, it was clear to everyone that the forty-one-year-old Tsar was deeply in love with his handsome, black-

haired young wife. She brought him freshness, happiness, relaxation and a sense of renewal. He wanted her constantly by his side and took her with him wherever he went. The first spring and summer of their marriage, the newlyweds moved happily from one to another of the Tsar's summer palaces around Moscow, including Preobrazhenskoe, where Alexis rode with his falcons.

At court, the new Tsaritsa quickly became an agent of change. With her semi-Western upbringing in Matveev's house, Natalya loved music and theater. Early in his reign, Alexis had issued an edict sternly forbidding his subjects to dance, to play games or watch them, at wedding feasts either to sing or play on instruments, or to give one's soul to perdition in such pernicious and lawless practices as word play, farces or magic. "Offenders for the first and second offenses are to be beaten with rods; for the third and fourth to be banished to the border towns." But when Alexis married Natalya, an orchestra played at his wedding banquet, mingling its new polyphonic Western harmonies with the strains of a Russian choir chanting in unison. The blend of sounds was far from perfect; Dr. Collins described the cacophony as being like "a flight of screech owls, a nest of jackdaws, a pack of hungry wolves, and seven hogs on a windy day."

Royal sponsorship of the theater soon followed. To please his young bride, the Tsar began to patronize playwriting and ordered construction of a stage and hall in the former house of a boyar inside the Kremlin and another at the summer retreat of Preobrazhenskoe. The Lutheran pastor in the German Suburb, Johannes Gregory, was asked by Matveev to recruit actors and produce plays. On October 17, 1672, the first production, a Biblical drama, was ready. It was presented in the presence of Tsar and Tsaritsa with a cast of sixty, all of whom were foreigners except a few boys and young men from the court. The play lasted all day and the Tsar watched the performance for ten hours straight without rising from his seat. Four additional plays and two ballets soon followed.

Alexis' delight in his new Tsaritsa increased even more when, in the fall of 1671, he learned that she was pregnant. Both father and mother prayed for a son, and on May 30, 1672, at one o'clock in the morning, she delivered a large, apparently healthy boy. The child was named Peter after the apostle. Along with good health, his mother's black, vaguely Tatar eyes, and a tuft of auburn hair, the royal infant entered the world at normal size. In accordance with the old Russian custom of "taking the measure," an image of Peter's patron saint was painted on a board of exactly the same dimensions as the infant, and the resultant image of St. Peter with the Holy Trinity measures nineteen and a quarter inches long and five and a quarter inches wide.

Moscow rejoiced when the booming of the great bell in the Tower of Ivan the Great on the Kremlin square announced the birth of this new Tsarevich. Messengers galloped to carry the news to other Russian towns, and special ambassadors were dispatched to Europe. From the white ramparts of the Kremlin, cannon thundered in salute for three days, while the bells of the city's 1,600 churches pealed continuously.

Alexis was overjoyed with his new son, and personally arranged every detail of a service of public thanksgiving in the Assumption Cathedral. Afterward, Alexis raised Kyril Naryshkin, Natalya's father, and Matveev, her foster father, in rank, and then himself handed vodka and wines from trays to his guests.

The baby Peter, four weeks old, was christened on June 29, the holy day of St. Peter in the Orthodox calendar. Wheeled into church in a rolling cradle along a path sprinkled with holy water, the child was held over the font by Fedor Naryshkin, the Tsaritsa's eldest brother, and christened by Alexis' private confessor. The following day, a royal banquet was offered to delegations of boyars, merchants and other citizens of Moscow who thronged to the Kremlin with congratulatory gifts. The tables were decorated with enormous blocks of sugar sculpted into larger-than-life statues of eagles, swans and other birds. There was even an intricate sugar model of the Kremlin, with figures of tiny people coming and going. In her private apartments above the banqueting halls, the Tsaritsa Natalya gave a separate reception for the wives and daughters of the boyars, handing plates of sweets to her guests on their departure.

Soon afterward, the subject of all this celebration, surrounded by his own small, private household staff, was moved into his suite of rooms. He had a governess, a wet nurse—"a good and clean woman with sweet and healthy milk"—and a staff of dwarfs especially trained to act as servants and playmates to the royal children. When Peter was two, he and his retinue, now grown to include fourteen attending

gentlewomen, moved into a grander Kremlin apartment—the walls hung with deep red fabrics, the furniture upholstered in crimson and embroidered with threads of gold and bright blue. Peter's clothes—miniature caftans, shirts, vests, stockings and caps—were cut from silk, satin and velvet, embroidered with silver and gold, buttoned and tasseled with sewn clusters of pearls and emeralds.

A doting mother, a proud father and a pleased Matveev competed to lavish gifts on the child, and Peter's nursery soon overflowed with elaborate models and toys. In one corner stood a carved wooden horse with a leather saddle studded with silver nails and a bridle decorated with emeralds. On a table near the window rested an illuminated picture book, painstakingly made for him by six icon painters. Music boxes and a small, elegant clavichord with copper strings were brought from Germany. But Peter's favorite toys and his earliest games were military. He liked to bang on cymbals and drums. Toy soldiers and forts, model pikes, swords, arquebuses and pistols spread across his tables and chairs and floor. Next to his bed, Peter kept his most precious toy, given to him by Matveev, who had bought it from a foreigner: a model of a boat.

Intelligent, active and noisy, Peter grew rapidly. Most children walk at around one year; Peter walked at seven months. His father liked taking this healthy little Tsarevich with him on excursions around Moscow and to the royal villas outside the capital. Sometimes he went to Preobrazhenskoe, the informal retreat where Matveev had built a summer theater; this quiet place on the banks of the Yauza River beyond the German Suburb was Natalya's favorite. But more often he was taken to the architectural marvel of Alexis' reign, the huge palace at Kolomenskoe.

This immense building, constructed entirely of wood, was regarded by Russian contemporaries as the Eighth Wonder of the World. Standing on a bluff overlooking a bend in the Moscow River, it was an exotic jumble of shingled onion domes, tent roofs, steep pyramidal towers, horseshoe arches, vestibules, latticed stairways, balconies and porches, arcades, courtyards and gateways. A separate three-storied building, with two peaked towers, served as the private apartment of Peter and his half-brother Ivan. Although from the outside it seemed a crazy quilt of old Russian architecture, the palace had many modern features. There were baths not only for members of the family, but also for the servants

(the palace of Versailles, constructed at roughly the same time, was built without either baths or toilets). The wooden walls of the Kolomenskoe palace were pierced by 3,000 mica-paned windows, and light streamed in on 270 rooms decorated in modern, secular style. Brightly painted scenes decorated the ceilings, mirrors and velvet drapes hung on the walls, interspersed with portraits of Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great. The silver throne, studded with gems, on which Alexis received his visitors was flanked by two giant bronze lions. When the Tsar pushed a lever, the eyes of these mechanical beasts would roll, their jaws would open, and from their throats came a hoarse, brassy roar.*

Natalya preferred the less formal daily routine in these suburban palaces to that in the Kremlin. Hating the stuffy air of the Tsaritsa's closed carriage, she raised its curtains—in public—and was soon riding to and from the country, and once even in a state procession, in an uncovered carriage with her husband and child. Because it was easier for her to watch, Alexis received foreign ambassadors at Kolomenskoe rather than at the Kremlin. In 1675, the procession of the arriving Austrian ambassador was deliberately slowed as it passed the window where the Tsaritsa sat, so that she might have more time to observe. This same diplomat, waiting to be presented to the Tsar, caught a glimpse of Peter: "The door opened suddenly and Peter, three years old, a curly-headed boy, was seen for a moment holding his mother's hand."

Later that year, Peter was regularly seen in public. Alexis had ordered several of the large, gilded court carriages used by other contemporary European monarchs. Matveev, knowing exactly how to please, thereupon ordered a miniature copy of one of these carriages and presented it to Peter. This tiny coach, "inset with gold ornament, drawn by four dwarf ponies, with four dwarfs riding at the side and another dwarf behind," became a favorite sight on state occasions.

Alexis had five years with Natalya Naryshkina. A second child, named Natalya after her mother, was born and lived; a third child, again a daughter, was born and died. At court, the effect of the marriage had

* In 1771, exactly 100 years after it was built, the great wooden palace was torn down by Catherine the Great.

been strongly felt. The austere, painfully religious quality of Alexis' earlier years gave way to a new, more relaxed spirit, a greater readiness to accept Western ideas, entertainments and techniques. But the greatest effect was on the Tsar himself. Marriage to this young wife revived and delighted him. The last years of his life were the happiest.

Suddenly, when Peter was only three and a half, the serenity of his nursery life was shattered. On Epiphany in January 1676, Tsar Alexis, at forty-seven, healthy and active, took part in the annual ceremony of the blessing of the waters of the Moscow River. Standing in the frozen winter air during the long ceremony, he caught a chill. A few days later, in the middle of the performance of a play, the Tsar left the Kremlin theater and went to bed. At first, the illness did not seem dangerous. Nevertheless, it grew steadily worse, and after ten days, on February 8, Tsar Alexis died.

At a stroke, Peter's world changed. He had been the adored small son of a father who doted on his mother; now he was the potentially troublesome offspring of his dead father's second wife. The successor to the throne was fifteen-year-old Fedor, the semi-invalid eldest surviving son of Maria Miloslavskaya. Although Fedor had never been well, in 1674 Alexis had formally declared him to be of age, recognized him as heir and presented him as such to his subjects and the foreign ambassadors. At that time, it had seemed only a formality; Fedor's health was so delicate and Alexis' so good that few thought the delicate son would live to succeed the robust father.

But now it had happened: Fedor was Tsar, and the great pendulum of power had swung back again from Naryshkin to Miloslavsky. Although his legs were so swollen that he had to be carried to his coronation, Fedor was crowned without opposition. The Miloslavskys came flooding triumphantly back to office. Fedor himself bore no ill-will against his stepmother, Natalya, or his little half-brother, Peter, but he was only fifteen and could not completely resist the power of his Miloslavsky relatives.

At the head of this clan stood his uncle Ivan Miloslavsky, who had hastened back from his post as Governor of Astrachan to replace Matveev as chief minister. That Matveev himself, as effective leader of the

Naryshkin party, would in turn be banished to some ceremonial post was expected; it was an accepted accompaniment to the swing of the pendulum; it would balance the sending of Miloslavsky to Astrachan. The Tsaritsa Natalya, therefore, was saddened but resigned when her foster father was ordered to depart for Siberia to become Governor of Verkoture, a province in the northwestern part of that immense territory. But she was shocked and terrified when she learned that, en route to his new post, Matveev had been overtaken by new orders from Ivan Miloslavsky: Matveev was to be arrested, stripped of all his property and conducted as a state prisoner to Pustozersk, a remote town north of the Arctic Circle. (Actually, Ivan Miloslavsky's fear of his powerful rival had driven him even further: he had tried to have Matveev condemned to death, charging him with theft from the Treasury, the use of magic and even an attempt to poison Tsar Alexis. Ivan Miloslavsky pressed young Fedor hard, but the Tsar refused the death sentence and Miloslavsky had to settle for Matveev's imprisonment.)

Deprived of their powerful champion, and with their other supporters pushed from office, Natalya and her two children faded from public view. At first, Natalya feared for her children's physical safety; her son, three-and-a-half-year-old Peter, remained the Naryshkin party's hope for the future. But as time passed, the Tsaritsa relaxed; the life of a royal prince was still considered sacred, and Tsar Fedor never exhibited toward his newly poor relations anything but sympathy and kindness. They remained in the Kremlin, cloistered in their private apartments. There Peter began his education. At that time in Muscovy, most people, even among the gentry and the clergy, were illiterate. In the nobility, education rarely consisted of more than reading, writing and a smattering of history and geography. Instruction in grammar, mathematics and foreign languages was reserved for religious scholars who needed these tools to grapple with theology. There were exceptions: two of Tsar Alexis' children, Fedor and his sister the Tsarevna Sophia, had been placed in the hands of famous theological scholars from Kiev, had received a thorough classical education and could speak the foreign languages of a truly learned seventeenth-century Muscovite, Latin and Polish.

Peter's education began simply. At three, when his father was still alive, he had been given a primer to start learning the alphabet. When

he reached five, Tsar Fedor, who was his godfather as well as his half-brother, said to Natalya, "Madam, it is time our godson started his lessons." Nikita Zotov, a clerk who worked in the tax-collection department, was selected as Peter's tutor. Zotov, an amiable, literate man who knew the Bible well but was not a scholar, was overwhelmed at being chosen for his role. Trembling, he was led to the Tsaritsa, who received him with Peter at her side. "You are a good man well versed in the Holy Writ," she said, "and I entrust to you my only son." Whereupon Zotov flung himself on the ground and burst into tears. "Matushka," he cried, "I am not worthy to look after such a treasure!" The Tsaritsa gently raised him up and told him that Peter's lessons would begin the next day. To encourage Zotov, the Tsar gave him a suite of apartments and raised him to the rank of minor nobleman, the Tsaritsa presented him with two complete sets of new clothes and the Patriarch gave him 100 roubles.

On the following morning, with both Tsar and Patriarch present to watch, Zotov gave Peter his first lesson. The new schoolbooks were sprinkled with holy water, Zotov bowed low to his small pupil and the lesson began. Zotov started first with the alphabet and, as time passed, went on to the Prayer Book and the Bible. Long passages of Holy Scripture, drilled into Peter's early memory, remained with him permanently; forty years later, he could recite them by heart. He was taught to sing the magnificent Russian choral litany, and he took great pleasure in this talent. In later years, traveling through Russia, Peter often attended services in country churches. His practice on these occasions was to stride straight up to the choir and sing along in a loud voice.

Zotov's assignment had been only to teach Peter to read and write, but he found his pupil eager to go further. Peter constantly urged Zotov to tell him more stories of Russian history, of battles and heroes. When Zotov mentioned the boy's enthusiasm to Natalya, she commissioned master engravers from the Ordnance Office to compose books of colored drawings depicting foreign cities and palaces, sailing ships, weapons and historical events. Zotov placed this collection in Peter's room so that when the boy was bored with his regular lessons, these books could be brought out, looked at and discussed. A giant globe, taller than a man, sent to Tsar Alexis from Western Europe, was brought to the

schoolroom for Peter to study. Its depiction of the geography of Europe and Africa was remarkably accurate. The details of the eastern coast of North America were also correct—Chesapeake Bay, Long Island and Cape Cod were all precisely drawn—but farther west the lines became more inexact. California, for example, was shown as separate from the rest of the continent.

In the schoolroom, Zotov won Peter's deep affection, and for as long as the tutor lived, Peter kept him close. Zotov has been criticized for giving his pupil an inferior education, inadequate to the needs of a boy who would be tsar, yet at the time of these lessons Peter stood behind his two half-brothers, Fedor and Ivan, in the succession. His education, though less severely classical than that given to Fedor and Sophia, was far better than that of the average Russian nobleman. Most important, it was perhaps the best education for a mind like Peter's. He was not a scholar, but he was unusually open and curious, and Zotov stimulated this curiosity; it is doubtful that anyone could have done better. Strange though it may seem, when this royal prince who was to become an emperor reached manhood, he was, in large part, a self-taught man. From his earliest years, he himself had chosen what he wished to learn. The mold which created Peter the Great was not made by any parent, tutor or counselor; it was cast by Peter himself.

Between classroom and play in the Kremlin and at Kolomenskoe, Peter's life passed uneventfully during the six years (1676–1682) of Fedor's reign. Fedor seemed very much his father's son—mild-mannered, indulgent and relatively intelligent, having been educated by the leading scholars of the day. Unfortunately, his scurvy-like disease frequently forced him to rule Russia lying on his back.

Nevertheless, Fedor did carry out one great reform, the abolition of the medieval system of precedence, a crushing weight on public administration, which decreed that noblemen could only accept state offices or military commands according to their rank. And to prove his rank, every boyar jealously guarded his family records. There were endless squabbles, and it became impossible to put capable men in key positions because others, citing higher rank, would refuse to serve under them. This system enshrined incompetence, and in the seven-

teenth century, in order to field an army at all, the tsars had been forced to set the system aside temporarily and declare that wartime commands would be assigned "without precedence."

Fedor wanted to make these temporary waivers permanent. He appointed a commission which recommended the permanent abolition of precedence; then he called a special council of boyars and clergy and personally urged the abolition for the welfare of the state. The Patriarch enthusiastically supported him. The boyars, suspicious and reluctant to give up the hallowed prerogatives of rank, grudgingly agreed. Fedor ordered that all family documents, service books and anything pertaining to previous precedence and rank be surrendered. Before the eyes of the Tsar, the Patriarch and the council, these were wrapped in bundles, carried into a Kremlin courtyard and tossed into the flames of a bonfire. Fedor decreed that thereafter offices and power would be distributed on a basis of merit and not of birth, a principle which Peter would subsequently make the foundation of his own military and civilian administration. (Ironically, many boyars, seeing their ancient privileges go up in smoke, silently cursed Fedor and the Miloslavskys and thought of the young Peter as a potential savior of the old ways.)

Although he had married twice in his brief life, Fedor died without an heir. His first wife died in childbirth, followed a few days later by her newborn son. The death of this infant and Fedor's declining health increased the uneasiness of the Miloslavskys, who urged Fedor to marry again. He agreed, despite the warnings of doctors that the exertions of marriage would kill him, because he had fallen in love with a beautiful, high-spirited, fourteen-year-old girl. Martha Apraxina was not the choice of the Miloslavskys; rather she was a goddaughter of Matveev, and she asked, as a condition of her marriage, that the imprisoned statesman be pardoned and his property restored. Fedor agreed, but before the godfather could arrive in Moscow to congratulate the bride in person, the Tsar, two and a half months after his wedding, was dead.

Since Michael Romanov's accession in 1613, each tsar had been succeeded by his eldest surviving son: Michael had been succeeded by his eldest surviving son, Alexis, and Alexis by his eldest surviving son, Fedor. In each case, before his own death, the tsar had formally presented this eldest son to the people and officially designated him the heir to the throne. But now Fedor had died without leaving a son or designating an heir.

The two surviving candidates were Fedor's sixteen-year-old brother, Ivan, and his ten-year-old half-brother, Peter. Normally, Ivan, who was six years older than Peter as well as being the son of Alexis' first wife, would have been the uncontested choice. But Ivan was nearly blind, lame and spoke with difficulty, whereas Peter was active, glowing and big for his age. More important, the boyars knew that, whichever boy ascended the throne, the actual power would be in the hands of a regent. By now, most of them were antagonistic to Ivan Miloslavsky and preferred Matveev, who, under the nominal regency of the Tsaritsa Natalya, would wield power if Peter became tsar.

The decision came immediately after the boyars' final leavetaking of Tsar Fedor. One by one, the boyars passed the bed on which the dead Tsar lay, stopping to kiss the cold white hand. Then the Patriarch Joachim and his bishops entered the crowded room, and Joachim posed the formal question, "Which of the two princes shall be tsar?" Arguments followed; some supported the Miloslavskys, saying that Ivan's claim was strongest; others urged that it was impractical and foolish to continue the rule of the Russian state from a sickbed. The discussion grew hot, and finally, out of the uproar, the cry was heard: "Let the people decide!"

In theory, "the people" meant that the tsar should be elected by a Zemsky Sobor, an Assembly of the Land, a gathering of noblemen, merchants and townspeople from all parts of the Muscovite state. It was an Assembly of the Land which in 1613 had persuaded the first Romanov, sixteen-year-old Michael, to accept the throne, and which had ratified the succession of Alexis. But such an assembly could not be gathered for weeks. Thus, at that moment, "the people" meant the Moscow crowd massed outside the palace windows.

The bells of the Ivan the Great bell tower sounded, and the Patriarch, the bishops and the boyars walked to the porch at the top of the Red Staircase overlooking Cathedral Square. Looking out over the crowd, the Patriarch cried, "The Tsar Fedor Alexeevich of blessed memory is dead. He leaves no heirs but his brothers, the Tsarevich Ivan Alexeevich and the Tsarevich Peter Alexeevich. To which of the two

princes do you give the rule?" There were loud shouts of "Peter Alexeevich" and a few cries of "Ivan Alexeevich," but the shouts for Peter became louder and drowned out the others. The Patriarch thanked and blessed the crowd. The choice was made.

Inside, the newly elected ten-year-old sovereign waited. His short, curly hair framed his round, tanned face with the large black eyes, the full lips, the wart on the right cheek. He reddened with self-consciousness when the Patriarch approached and began to speak. The churchman formally announced the death of the Tsar, his own election, and concluded, "In the name of the whole people of the Orthodox Faith, I beg you to be our tsar." Peter refused at first, saying that he was too young and that his brother would be better able to rule. The Patriarch insisted, saying, "Lord, reject not our petition." Peter was silent, his blush grew deeper. Minutes passed. Gradually, the people in the room understood that Peter's silence meant that he had accepted.

The crisis had passed. Peter was tsar, his mother would be regent and Matveev would rule. This is what everyone present believed at the end of that tumultuous day. But they had reckoned without the Tsarevna Sophia.

3

"A Maiden of Great Intelligence"

There was no typical Russian woman; Russian blood was a mixture of Slav, Tatar, Balt and others. Ideally, perhaps, a Russian woman was fair and comely, with light chestnut hair, and her figure, once past girlhood, was generous. In part, this was because Russian men liked strong women with big bosoms, and in part because their shapes, unmolded by stays, were free to expand as nature decreed. Western visitors, accustomed to the corseted waists of Versailles, St. James's, and the Hofburg, found Russian women bulky.

They were not uninterested in appearing beautiful. They dressed in long, flowing bright-colored sarafans embroidered with golden threads. Billowing sleeves flared out from the shoulders and would have covered the hands had they not been held at the wrist by glittering bracelets. The gowns worn over these sarafans were of velvet, taffeta or brocade. Girls wore their hair in a single long braid with a ring of flowers or a ribbon. A married woman was never bareheaded. Indoors, she wore a cloth headdress; when she went out, she donned a kerchief or a rich fur hat. They daubed their cheeks with red to enhance their beauty, and wore the handsomest earrings and most valuable rings which their husbands could afford.

Unfortunately, the higher a lady's rank and the more gorgeous her wardrobe, the less likely she was to be seen. The Muscovite idea of women, derived from Byzantium, had nothing of those romantic medi-

eval Western conceptions of gallantry, chivalry and the Court of Love. Instead, a woman was regarded as a silly, helpless child, intellectually void, morally irresponsible and, given the slightest chance, enthusiastically promiscuous. This puritanical idea that an element of evil lurked in all little girls affected their earliest childhood. In good families, children of opposite sexes were never allowed to play together—to preserve the boys from contamination. As they grew older, girls, too, were subject to contamination, and even the most innocent contact between youths and maidens was forbidden. Instead, to preserve their purity while teaching them prayer, obedience and a few useful skills such as embroidery, daughters were kept under lock and key. A song described them "sitting behind thirty locked doors, so that the wind may not ruffle their hair, nor the sun burn their cheeks, nor the handsome young men entice them." Thus they waited, ignorant and undefiled, until the day came to thrust them into the hands of a husband.

Usually, a girl was married in the full bloom of adolescence to a man she had not met until all the major parties to the marriage—her father, the bridegroom and the bridegroom's father—had made the decision final. The negotiations might have been lengthy; they involved critical matters such as the size of the dowry and guarantees of the bride's virginity. If, subsequently, in the not necessarily expert opinion of the young bridegroom, the girl had had previous experience, he could ask that the marriage be voided and the dowry returned. This meant a messy lawsuit; far better to examine carefully in advance and be absolutely sure.

When everything was settled, the young wife-to-be, her face covered with a linen veil, was summoned into her father's presence to be introduced to her future husband. Taking a small whip, the father struck his daughter lightly on the back, saying, "My daughter, this is the last time you shall be admonished by the authority of your father beneath whose rule you have lived. Now you are free of me, but remember that you have not so much escaped from my sway as passed beneath that of another. Should you not behave as you ought to toward your husband, he in my stead will admonish you with this whip." Whereupon the father handed the whip to the bridegroom, who, according to custom, nobly declared that he "believes he will have no need of this whip." Nevertheless, he accepted it as a gift from his father-in-law, and attached it to his belt.

On the wedding eve, the bride was brought by her mother to the bridegroom's house with her trousseau and the nuptial bed. In the morning, heavily veiled, she went through the ceremony, pledging fidelity by exchanging rings and then falling at her husband's feet, touching her forehead to his shoes in a gesture of subjugation. With his wife on the floor beneath him, the bridegroom benevolently covered her with the hem of his coat, acknowledging his obligation to support and protect this humble creature. Then, while the guests began to banquet, the newlyweds went straight to bed. They were given two hours, after which the doors of their room flew open and the guests crowded around, wanting to know whether the husband had found his wife a virgin. If the answer was yes, congratulations were lavished upon them, they were led to a bath of sweet-smelling herbs and then to the banquet hall to join in the feast. If the answer was no, everyone, but most of all the bride, suffered.

Once married, the new wife assumed her place in her husband's home, as an animate domestic chattel, and possessed no rights except through him. Her functions were to look after his house, see to his comfort and bear his children. If she had sufficient talent, she ruled as mistress over the servants; if not, in the master's absence the servants took charge without asking or telling her anything. When her husband had an important guest, she was permitted to appear before dinner, dressed in her best ceremonial robes, bearing a welcoming cup on a silver tray. Standing before the guest, she bowed, handed the cup, offered her cheek for a Christian kiss and then wordlessly withdrew. When she bore a child, those who feared her husband or wanted his patronage came to congratulate him and present a gold piece for the newborn. If the gift was generous, the husband had good reason to be happy with his excellent wife.

If the husband was not happy, there were procedures for improving his situation. In most cases, where only a mild correction was necessary, he could beat her. The *Domostroy* or Household Management Code, dating from 1556 and attributed to a monk named Sylvester, gave specific advice to the heads of Muscovite families on numerous domestic

matters, from preserving mushrooms to disciplining wives. On the latter issue, it recommended that "disobedient wives should be severely whipped, though not in anger." Even a good wife should be taught by her husband "by using the whip to her from time to time, but nicely, in secret, and in a polite fashion, avoiding blows of the fist which cause bruises." In the lower classes, Russian men beat their wives on the slightest pretext. "Some of these barbarians will tie up their wives by the hair of their head, and whip them stark naked," wrote Dr. Collins. Sometimes the beatings were so severe that the woman died; then the husband was free to remarry. Inevitably, a few wives, tormented beyond endurance, struck back and murdered their husbands. The number was small because a new law, published early in Alexis' reign, dealt harshly with such criminals: a wife guilty of murdering her husband was buried alive in the earth with only her head protruding above the ground, and left to die.

In serious cases, where a wife was so hopelessly unsatisfactory that she was not worth beating, or where the husband had found another woman whom he preferred, the solution was divorce. To divorce his wife, an Orthodox husband had simply to thrust her, willing or not, into a convent. There, her hair was sheared off, she was dressed in a long black gown with wide sleeves and enshrouding hood and she became, in the eyes of the world, dead. For the rest of her life, she lived amid the crowds of women in nunneries, some of them young girls forced to abandon life by greedy brothers or relatives who wished to avoid sharing an estate or paying a dowry, others simply wives who had run away and preferred anything to going back to their husbands.

Once his wife was "dead," a husband was free to remarry, but this freedom was not unlimited. The Orthodox Church permitted a man two dead wives or two divorces, but his third wife had to be his last. Thus, a husband who had violently abused his first two wives was likely to handle his third with care; if she died or ran away, he could never marry again.

This isolation of women and disdain for their companionship had a grim effect on seventeenth-century Russian men. Family life was stifled, intellectual life was stagnant, the coarsest qualities prevailed and men, deprived of the society of women, found little else to do but drink. There were exceptions. In some households, intelligent women played

a key role, albeit behind the scenes; in a few, strong women even dominated weak husbands. Ironically, the lower a woman stood in the social scale, the greater her chance for equality. In the lower classes, where life was a struggle for simple existence, women could not be pushed aside and treated as useless children; their brains and muscle were needed. They were considered inferior, but they lived side by side with men. They bathed with men, and ran laughing through the snow with men, completely naked. On endless winter evenings, they joined the men in feasting and drinking around the stove, packed together, allowing embraces from whoever was next to them, laughing, crying and finally falling asleep in drunken communion. If a husband was cruel, still he had once been kind; if he beat her, it permitted her to forgive again. "Yes, he beats me, but then he falls on his knees with tears in his eyes and begs my forgiveness. . . ."

At the summit of the female social order stood the tsaritsa, the wife of the tsar. Her life, although more comfortable than that of her lesser sisters, was no more independent. She devoted her time to her family, to prayer and to good deeds and charities. Within the palace, she directed the household, seeing to her own wardrobe and watching over that of her husband and children. Usually, the tsaritsa herself was skilled with a needle and embroidered robes and vestments, either for the tsar or the church; in addition, she supervised the labor of many seamstresses. It was her duty to give generously to the poor and to oversee the marriages and ensure the dowries of the numerous young women of her household. Like her husband, the tsaritsa spent much time in church, but, even with all her duties, there were many empty hours. To pass the time, the tsaritsa played cards, listened to stories, watched the singing and dancing of her maidens and laughed at the clowning of her dwarfs dressed in bright-pink costumes with red leather boots and green cloth caps. At the end of the day, after vespers and when the tsar had finished his work, the tsaritsa might be summoned to visit her husband.

Whether or not marriage was a desirable state for a seventeenth-century Russian woman was arguable. But there were some women in Russian society who would never know. By rank, they were at the very top, the sisters and daughters of the tsar. By fortune, who can say? None of these princesses, called tsarevnas, would ever meet a man, fall in

love, marry and have children. Similarly, none would ever be haggled over, marketed, legally raped, beaten or divorced. The barrier was their rank. They could never marry Russians beneath their own royal rank (although the tsar could choose a wife from the nobility), and they were barred by religion from marrying foreigners—by definition, infidels or heretics. Therefore, from birth they were doomed to live their lives in the narrow gloom of the terem, an apartment, usually at the top of a large Russian house, reserved for women. There, they passed their time in prayer, embroidery, gossip and boredom. They would never know anything of the wider world, and the world would notice their existence only when it was announced that they had been born or died.

Except for their close male relatives and the patriarch and a few selected priests, no man ever set eyes on these shadowy royal recluses. The terem itself was an exclusively female world. When a tsarevna was ill, the shutters were drawn and the curtains closed to darken the room and hide the patient. If it was necessary to take her pulse or examine her body, it had to be done through a covering of gauze so that no male fingers would touch the naked female skin. Early in the morning or late at night, the tsarevnas went to church, hurrying through closed corridors and secret passageways. In cathedrals or chapels, they stood screened behind red silk curtains in a dark part of the choir to avoid the gaze of male eyes. When they walked in state processionals, it was behind the moving silken walls of closed canopies. When they left the Kremlin on pilgrimage to a convent, it was in specially constructed bright-red carriages or sledges, closed like movable cells, surrounded by maids and men on horseback to clear the roads.

The terem should have been Sophia's world. Born in 1657, she lived there in early childhood, one of a dozen princesses—the sisters, aunts and daughters of Tsar Alexis—all caged behind its tiny windows. There seemed no reason for her rare and extraordinary quality. She was simply the third of Alexis' eight daughters by Maria Miloslavskaya; she was one of six who survived. Like her sisters, she should have been equipped with a rudimentary female education and passed her life in anonymous seclusion.

And yet Sophia was different. That strange alchemy which, for no

apparent reason, lifts one child out of a large family and endows it with a special destiny had created Sophia. She had the intelligence, the ambition, the decisiveness which her feeble brothers and anonymous sisters so overwhelmingly lacked. It was almost as if her siblings had been drained of normal health, vitality and purpose in order to magnify these qualities in Sophia.

From an early age, it was apparent that Sophia was exceptional. As a child, she somehow persuaded her father to break the terem tradition and permit her to share the lessons of her brother Fedor, who was four years younger. Her tutor was the eminent scholar Simeon Polotsky, a monk of Polish ancestry from the famous academy in Kiev. Polotsky found her "a maiden of great intelligence and the most delicate understanding, with an accomplished masculine mind." Together with a younger monk, Sylvester Medvedev, Polotsky taught his pupil theology, Latin, Polish and history. She became acquainted with poetry and drama and even performed in religious plays. Medvedev shared Polotsky's view that the Tsarevna was a student with "marvelous understanding and judgment."

Sophia was nineteen when her father died and her fifteen-year-old brother became Tsar Fedor II. Soon after Fedor's coronation, the Tsarevna began to emerge from the obscurity of the terem. Increasingly throughout his reign, she was seen in circumstances hitherto wholly unknown to women. She attended sessions of the boyar council. Her uncle Ivan Miloslavsky and the leading minister, Prince Vasily Golitsyn, included her in their conversations and decisions, so that her political views matured and she learned to judge the character of men. Gradually, she came to realize that her intellectual attainments and strength of will matched and even surmounted those of the men around her, that there was no reason, except her sex and the unbroken tradition in Muscovy that the autocrat be a man, to bar her from supreme power.

During the last week of Fedor's life, Sophia stayed at his bedside, acting as comforter, confidante and messenger, and became deeply involved in affairs of state. Fedor's death and the sudden elevation to the throne of her half-brother, Peter, rather than her full brother, Ivan, were terrible blows to Sophia. She genuinely mourned Fedor, who had been her classmate and friend as well as her brother; further, the promise of a Naryshkin restoration at court meant the end of any special

status for her, a Miloslavsky princess. She would certainly have less contact with high officers of state like Prince Vasily Golitsyn, whom she had come to admire. Worse, because she and the new regent, the Tsaritsa Natalya, disliked each other, she might even be sent back to the terem.

Desperately, Sophia sought another solution. She hurried to the Patriarch to complain of Peter's quick election to the throne. "This election is unjust," she protested. "Peter is young and impetuous. Ivan has reached his majority. *He* must be the tsar." Joachim said that the decision could not be changed. "But at least let both rule!" begged Sophia. "No," decreed the Patriarch, "joint rule is ruinous. Let there be one tsar. It is thus pleasing to God." For the moment, Sophia had to retreat. A few days later, however, at Fedor's funeral, she made her feelings public. Peter, accompanied by his mother, followed the bier in the procession to the cathedral. Walking along, Natalya heard loud noises behind her and turned to find that Sophia had joined the procession without the moving canopy which traditionally screened a daughter of a tsar from the public. In the open, only partially veiled, Sophia was weeping theatrically and calling on the crowd to witness her grief.

Sophia's act was unprecedented, and at the crowded cathedral Natalya retaliated. During the long burial service, Natalya took Peter by the hand and walked out. Later, she explained that her son was exhausted and hungry and to have remained would have been bad for his health, but the Miloslavskys were scandalized. The situation was made worse by Natalya's arrogant younger brother Ivan Naryshkin, only just recalled to court. "The dead," he said, referring to the entire Miloslavsky clan, "should bury the dead."

On leaving the cathedral, Sophia again gave vent to her grief, now mingled with bitter rage. "You see how our brother Tsar Fedor has suddenly gone from this world. His enemies have poisoned him. Have pity on us orphans. We have no father, nor mother, nor brother. Our elder brother, Ivan, has not been elected tsar, and if we are to blame, let us go live in other lands which are ruled over by Christian kings."

4

The Revolt of the Streltsy

Throughout the first half of Peter's life, the key to power in Russia was the Streltsy, the shaggy, bearded pikemen and musketeers who guarded the Kremlin and were Russia's first professional soldiers. They were sworn to protect "the government" in a crisis but often had difficulty deciding where the legitimate government lay. They were a kind of collective dumb animal, never quite sure who was its proper master, but ready to rush and bite anyone who challenged its own privileged position. Ivan the Terrible had formed these regiments to give a permanent professional core to the unwieldy feudal host which previous Muscovite rulers had led into battle. These older armies, consisting of squadrons of mounted noblemen and a horde of armed peasants, were summoned in the spring and sent home in the autumn. Usually, these summer soldiers, untrained and undisciplined, clutching whatever spear or axe lay at hand when they were mustered, fared badly against their better-equipped Western enemies, the Poles or the Swedes.

On guard or on parade, the Streltsy were a colorful sight. Each regiment had its own vivid colors: a caftan or full-length coat of blue, green or cherry, a fur-trimmed hat of the same color, breeches tucked into yellow boots turned up at the toe. Over the caftan, each soldier buckled a black leather belt from which to sling his sword. In one hand, he carried a musket or arquebus, in the other a halberd or pointed battle-axe.

Most of the Streltsy were simple Russians, living by the old ways,

revering both tsar and patriarch, hating innovation and opposing reforms. Both officers and men were suspicious and resentful of the foreigners brought in to train the army in new weapons and tactics. They were ignorant of politics, but when they believed the country was veering from proper traditional paths, they easily convinced themselves that duty demanded their interference in affairs of state.

In peacetime, they had not enough to do. A few detachments were stationed on the Polish and Tatar frontiers, but the bulk was concentrated in Moscow, where they lived in special quarters near the Kremlin. By 1682, they numbered 22,000—divided into twenty-two regiments of 1,000 men each—who with their wives and children were an enormous mass of idle soldiery and dependents quartered in the heart of the capital. They were coddled: the tsar provided the handsome log houses in which they lived, the tsar furnished their food, their clothing and their pay. In return they served as sentries in the Kremlin and guards at the city gates. When the tsar traveled in Moscow, the Streltsy lined his route; when he left the city, they provided an escort. They served as policemen, carrying small whips to break up fights. When the city caught fire, the Streltsy became firemen.

Gradually, with so much extra time on their hands, the Streltsy drifted into trade. Individual Strelets opened shops. As members of the army, they paid no taxes on their profits and became rich. Membership in the regiments became desirable and enlistment a privilege passed down on an almost hereditary basis. As soon as a boy was old enough, he was enrolled in his father's regiment. Naturally, the richer the Streltsy became, the more reluctant they were to resume their primary duties as soldiers. A Strelets with a profitable shop was likely to offer bribes rather than accept some arduous assignment. The Streltsy officers also profited from this large pool of manpower. Some used the idle musketeers as servants, others to build their houses or tend their gardens. Sometimes the officers embezzled the soldiers' pay, and soldiers' formal complaints to the government were usually ignored and the petitioners punished.

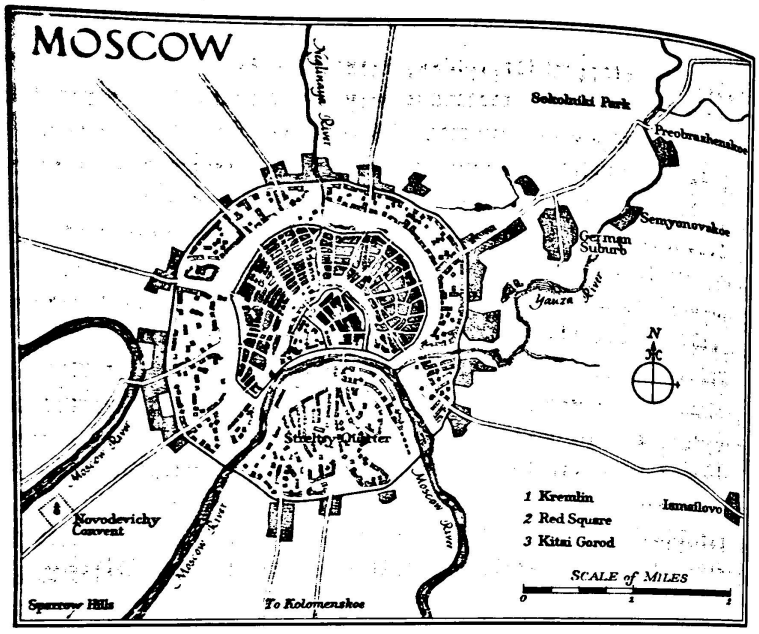
This is exactly what had happened in May 1682, as the young Tsar Fedor lay on his deathbed. The Griboyedov Regiment presented a formal petition accusing their colonel, Semyon Griboyedov, of withholding half their pay and forcing them to work during Easter Week on a house he was building outside Moscow. The commander of the

Streltsy, Prince Yury Dolgoruky, ordered the soldier presenting the petition to be whipped for insubordination. But this time, as the petitioner was being led to the knout, he passed a watching group of his regimental comrades. "Brothers," he cried, "why do you give me up? I gave the petition by your orders and for you!" Aroused, the Streltsy fell upon the guards and liberated the prisoner.

This incident inflamed the Streltsy Quarter. Seventeen regiments immediately accused their colonels of cheating or maltreatment and demanded punishment. The Regent Natalya's fledgling government, just taking office, inherited the crisis and floundered badly. Many boyars of the oldest families of Russia—the Dolgorukys, Repnins, Romodanovskys, Sheremetevs, Sheins, Kurakins and Urusovs—had rallied behind Peter and his mother, but none knew how to placate the Streltsy. In the end, desperate to blunt the soldiers' hostility, Natalya sacrificed the colonels. Without investigation, she ordered the colonels arrested and stripped of rank, and their property and wealth divided to meet the soldiers' claims. Two of the colonels, one of them Semyon Griboyedov, were publicly knouted, while twelve others were given the lesser punishment of being beaten with sticks, called batogs, at the direction of the Streltsy themselves. "Beat them harder," they urged, until their officers fainted. Then, the Streltsy grumbled with satisfaction. "They have had enough. Let them go."

Allowing a mutinous soldiery to beat its officers was a risky way of restoring discipline. For the moment, the Streltsy were appeased, but in fact their new sense of power, their increased assurance that they were entitled and even obligated to purge the state of its enemies, had made them far more dangerous.

The Streltsy thought they knew who these enemies were: the boyars and the Naryshkins. Sinister stories had been passed among them. It was rumored that Fedor had not died naturally, as had been announced, but had been poisoned by foreign doctors with the connivance of the boyars and the Naryshkins. These same enemies had then pushed aside Ivan, the rightful heir, in favor of Peter. Now that their diabolical schemes had succeeded, foreigners would be given power in the army and government, Orthodoxy would be degraded and trampled, and, worst of all, those faithful defenders of the old values in Muscovy, the Streltsy, would be horribly punished.



These were stories which played on the traditional prejudices of the Streltsy. And other events were described in a manner calculated to arouse the soldiery. On taking office, Natalya had distributed wholesale new promotions in rank to all her Naryshkin relatives, even elevating her arrogant twenty-three-year-old younger brother Ivan to the rank of boyar. Ivan Naryshkin already was an object of dislike for his remark at Fedor's funeral. Now, fresh rumors spread: that he had rudely pushed the Tsarevna Sophia to the ground; that he had taken the crown and placed it on his own head, declaring that it looked better on him than on anyone else.

But the stories had a source, the rumors a purpose. Who was behind this effort to arouse the Streltsy? One instigator was Ivan Miloslavsky, who was keenly anxious to overthrow Peter, Natalya and the Naryshkin party. Having already been exiled himself during the previous period of Naryshkin dominance at court, he had retaliated by sending Matveev to six years of harsh internment in the Arctic; now, Matveev was returning to Moscow to act as chief advisor to the new Regent—

Tsaritsa Natalya Naryshkina—and Ivan Miloslavsky knew what he could expect in this latest shift of power. Another plotter was Prince Ivan Khovansky, a vain, incessantly noisy man whose soaring ambitions were constantly thwarted by his own incompetence. Relieved of his post as Governor of Pskov, he was called before Tsar Alexis, who told him, "Everybody calls you a fool." Never willing to accept this valuation, convinced by the Miloslavskys that high office awaited him at their hands, he was an active supporter of their cause.

Surprisingly, the plot also involved Prince Vasily Golitsyn, a man of Western tastes, caught on the Miloslavsky side because of the enemies he had made. During Fedor's reign, Golitsyn had urged reforms. It was he who drew up the new organization of the army and proposed the abolition of precedence, and for this the boyars hated him. As the boyars now supported Natalya and the Naryshkins, Golitsyn was thrown among the Miloslavskys.

Ivan Miloslavsky, Ivan Khovansky and Vasily Golitsyn all had motives for inciting the Streltsy, but, should such a revolt succeed, none of them could step forward and rule the Russian state. Only one person was a member of the royal family, had been the confidante of Tsar Fedor and could act as regent if young Ivan mounted the throne. Only one person was now threatened with complete seclusion in a convent or terem and the extinction of all meaningful political or personal existence. Only one person had the intelligence and courage to attempt to overthrow an elected tsar. No one knows the exact extent of her involvement in the plot and the terrible events that followed; some say it was done on her behalf but without her knowledge. But the circumstantial evidence is strong that the chief conspirator was Sophia.

Meanwhile, completely unaware, Natalya waited anxiously in the Kremlin for Matveev's return. On the day of Peter's election as tsar, she had sent messengers urging him to come quickly to Moscow. He started back, but his trip turned into a triumphal progress. Every town through which he passed offered thanksgiving services and a feast for the rehabilitated statesman. Finally, on the evening of May 11, after six years in exile, the old man reentered Moscow. Natalya greeted him as her saviour and presented him to the ten-year-old Tsar, whom he had last seen as a child of four. Matveev's hair was white and his step was slow, but Natalya was certain that, with his experience and wisdom, with the

prestige he enjoyed among both boyars and Streltsy, the old man would soon be able to establish order and harmony.

So it seemed for three days. During this time, Matveev's house was crowded with welcoming boyars, merchants and foreign friends from the German Suburb. The Streltsy, remembering him as an honorable former commander, sent delegations from the regiments to pay their respects. Even members of the Miloslavsky family came, with the exception of Ivan Miloslavsky, who sent word that he was ill. Matveev received them all with happy tears streaming down his face, while his house, cellars and courtyard overflowed with welcoming gifts. Peril seemed distant, but Matveev, newly arrived on the scene and still not in full control, underestimated the danger. Sophia and her party never relaxed, and the spark of revolt remained alive among the regiments. Matveev and Natalya, isolated in the Kremlin and enveloped in their happiness, did not feel the mounting tension, but others did. Baron Van Keller, the Dutch ambassador, wrote: "The discontent of the Streltsy continues. All public affairs are at a standstill. Great calamities are feared and not without cause, for the might of the Streltsy is great and no resistance can be opposed to them."

At nine o'clock on the morning of May 15, the smoldering spark burst into flame. Two horsemen, Alexander Miloslavsky and Peter Tolstoy, both members of Sophia's intimate circle, galloped into the Streltsy Quarter, shouting, "The Naryshkins have murdered the Tsarevich Ivan! To the Kremlin! The Naryshkins will kill the whole royal family. To arms! Punish the traitors!"

The Streltsy Quarter erupted. Bells tolled urgently, battle drums began to beat. Men in caftans buckled on their armor and their sword belts, grasped their halberds, spears and muskets and assembled in the streets ready for battle. Some of the musketeers chopped off the handles of their long spears and halberds to make weapons deadlier at close range. Unfurling their broad regimental banners embroidered with pictures of the Virgin, and beating their drums, they began to advance through the streets toward the Kremlin. As they approached, terrified citizens scurried out of their path. "We are going to the Kremlin to kill the traitors and murderers of the Tsar's family!" the soldiers shouted.

Meanwhile, within the offices and palaces of the Kremlin, the day was proceeding normally. No one had the slightest idea of what was happening in the city or of the doom moving toward them. The great gates of the citadel were wide open, with only a scattering of sentries. A meeting of the council of boyars had just ended and the boyars were sitting quietly in their offices and in the public rooms of the palaces, or strolling and talking while waiting for their midday dinner. Matveev was just leaving the council chamber and coming out onto the staircase leading to the bedchamber when he saw Prince Fedor Urusov running toward him, out of breath.

Urusov gasped out the news: The Streltsy had risen! They were marching through the city toward the Kremlin! Matveev, astounded and alarmed, returned to the palace to warn the Tsaritsa Natalya; he ordered the Patriarch to come immediately, the Kremlin gates to be closed, the duty regiment of Streltsy, the Stremyani Regiment, to man the walls and prepare to defend Peter, his family and the government.

Scarcely had Matveev finished speaking when three messengers arrived one after another, each bringing worse news than his predecessor. The first announced that the Streltsy were already nearing the Kremlin walls; the second, that the gates could not be closed so quickly; and the third, that everything was too late, for the Streltsy were already inside the Kremlin. As he spoke, hundreds of rebellious musketeers were surging through the open gates, up the hill and into Cathedral Square in front of the Facets Palace. As they came, the soldiers of the Stremyani Regiment were swept along with them, abandoning their posts and joining their comrades from other regiments.

At the top of the hill, the Streltsy poured into the square surrounded by the three cathedrals and the Ivan Bell Tower. Massed before the Red Staircase, which led from the square into the palace, they shouted, "Where is the Tsarevich Ivan? Give us the Naryshkins and Matveev! Death to the traitors!" Inside, the terrified boyars of the council, still uncertain as to what had provoked this violent assault, collected in the palace banquet hall. Prince Cherkassky, Prince Golitsyn and Prince Sheremetev were chosen to go out and ask the Streltsy what they wanted. They learned from the cries: "We want to punish the traitors! They have killed the Tsarevich and will kill the whole royal family! Give us the Naryshkins and the other traitors!" Understanding that in